

The Hon. Kim Beazley
Australian Ambassador to the USA
Address to the 2010 Asia Society Texas Center Tiger Ball
Houston, Texas
2 June 2010

It is at once a pleasure and an honour to accept the Huffington award on behalf of the Prime Minister of Australia. I know that Kevin would very much have wanted to pick up this award in person. Like everyone in Australia who knows and works on our region, he has great respect and regard for the Asia Society.

You honour the Prime Minister personally with this award, but you are also recognising all those Australians who have worked to integrate Australia with Asia – politically, culturally, socially, economically, diplomatically. In that context, the sterling work done by the Prime Minister builds on the foundations laid by Australians with whose names you might possibly be less familiar, people like Nancy Viviani, Stephen Fitzgerald, Tom Critchley, Bruce Grant, Peter Drysdale, Dick Woolcott, George Morrison and CP Fitzgerald. On the political side – Bob Hawke, Paul Keating, Gough Whitlam, Richard Casey, Harold Holt, HV Evatt, Gareth Evans, Percy Spender.

All those people have taken on, for Australia and for Australians, the task to which the Society has committed itself for the United States and for Americans. They have broadened and deepened the base of knowledge, they have expanded the networks of people-to-people contacts, they have helped to educate and enlighten our public about the potential, and the problems, in Asia. For decades, the Society has been pursuing the same goal, with the same sort of altruistic, dedicated, determined commitment. The Prime Minister has personally worked tirelessly towards the same objective.

Indeed, less than two months ago the Prime Minister launched another initiative to deepen Australia's engagement with the region – this one with China. His contribution here was directed at global knowledge as he announced on behalf of the Australian Government a contribution of some \$50 million for the creation of a centre for the study of China and the world.

His vision for the centre was that it should become the focal point for the encouragement of a new Sinology:

A new Sinology capable of opening up new ways of understanding this great and ancient civilisation, and what it might offer again in the future. The challenge for us all is how we move forward to promote a deeper, textured understanding of the China in the 21st century. Both a China that encourages us all, as well as a China that from time to time causes us to ask ourselves where China is going.

The Prime Minister noted that, in April 2008, when speaking at Peking University, he had talked about Australia's evolving relationship with China and the maturing of our friendship in this new era, in these terms:

“In the modern, globalised world, we are all connected; connected not only by politics and economics, but also in the air we breathe.

“A true friend is one who can be a zhengyou [*jehng-yo*], that is a partner who sees beyond immediate benefit to the broader and firm basis for continuing, profound and sincere friendship. In other words, a true friendship which ‘offers unflinching advice and counsels restraint’ to engage in principled dialogue about matters of contention. It is the kind of friendship that I know is treasured in China’s political tradition.”

The Prime Minister would seize the opportunity to talk in depth to such an influential, well-informed, well-placed audience about Australia, Asia, and how they fit together. That job I intend to take on myself.

One of your stock of wonderfully concise, pungent American sayings has it that: where you stand depends on where you sit. Throughout Australian history, establishing just where we sit, and how we fit, has been a complicated and contentious task in itself. We had to reconcile our history with our geography. We had to accommodate our past to our future. We had to learn to live with Asia, as an integral part of the region, not as a separate and detached fragment of transplanted European civilisation. The next step, establishing where we stand – with our neighbours and in the world – that has come later.

Let me explain. The United States is not an island but, for much of its history, your country was able to act like one. Australia is an island, the largest in the world, but has never been able to act like one. For some of our history, we regarded Australia as a sub-set of England, and looked back to England – ten thousand miles away – as “home”. That approach would be inconceivable – even unintelligible - in contemporary Australia, in a country where “home” can mean Italy, Greece, Turkey, Hungary, Lebanon, Vietnam and China (and everywhere else besides) to generations of post-war immigrants to Australia. For another part of our history, we tried to define ourselves without reference to – or even in opposition to – our neighbours in Asia.

Whether we recognised it or not, World War II shattered that proclivity. This city is memorialised in Australia’s year of living dangerously in 1942. USS Houston was lost in what was in effect a series of rolling naval engagements across Australia’s northern approaches, culminating in the checking of the Japanese in the Coral Sea in May. Houston was lost along with HMAS Perth in the Sunda Strait, valiantly trying to block a Japanese invasion force off Java. The action in the Sunda Strait was a story of my boyhood as year after year my father took us to the commemorative services run by Perth survivors held in St John’s Church, Fremantle.

That period of neglect is now long closed. That false option is now long discredited and dead. The most striking example is the most recent security crisis in our region, the unprovoked attack by North Korea on a ROK naval vessel. There, our response to the investigation report was one of immediate and unequivocal support to the ROK. Our position was considered and developed through the closest consultation between Australia, the ROK and Japan. Our Foreign Minister was in Japan at the time, for a major 2+2 strategic exchange with the Japanese government. That incident illustrates well the depth and the range of our engagement with our region.

In this country, using an American term, you might describe some past Australian policies in terms of isolationism, a brand of isolationism which combined nostalgia

with myopia and wishful thinking. To state the obvious, that policy did not work. Australia's security and our prosperity depend on the extent to which we are engaged, entrenched, enmeshed and entangled in Asia. We are not Asians, although an increasing number of Australians now trace their heritage, culture and families back to Asia. We are, inimitably, Australians. We are, however, deeply and firmly and clearly committed to a future with Asia. We seek no other future, and we have no other future. In the end, where you stand does depend on where you sit.

In the same way, many of your fellow Americans in California, in Washington State or in Hawaii immediately appreciate the vital importance of Asia. Elsewhere, in this great continent, the focus might not be quite as sharp. It is easy to be distracted away from Asia when you have tens of thousands of soldiers fighting in both Iraq and Afghanistan. It is easy to concentrate somewhere else when confronted with the risks of Iran's acquiring a nuclear weapons, the strategic arms reduction treaty with Russia, the huge challenges of disease control and food security in Africa, the conundrums of the Middle East dispute, or the need to build strategic partnerships with new sorts of partners.

Nonetheless, any lack of focus on Asia would be misplaced. We conventionally talk about the twenty first century as "the Asian century". Asia accounts for 60% of the world's population, and, this year, will provide 75% of the world's economic growth. If the twentieth century was "the European century", then we can only hope that Asia does better with its turn. If the role and influence of Asia is to be enhanced and consolidated, then, in turn, the role and influence of the United States in the region will need to be enhanced and consolidated.

Let me underline that point. For Australia, the place of the United States in the Asian region is incontestable, indisputable and indispensable. Your engagement is of bedrock importance to the security and prosperity of Asia. Millions of Asians depend, directly and indirectly, on the strength of that engagement. So do all the Asian economies.

We in Australia therefore greatly welcome the firm commitment by the Obama Administration to increase US engagement in Asia. We will give that commitment our support and our assistance, whenever and wherever possible. We warmly commend Secretary Clinton's determination to be involved personally and directly in all the major issues confronting the region. We are also looking forward to the time, later this month, when President Obama visits Indonesia and Australia. We see that visit as another tangible demonstration of the depth and the durability of the US commitment to Asia.

Asia is not an easy region to understand; many Australians and Americans like to assume that we know Europe better. That lack of thorough, up-to-date understanding is a simple point, but one we should not under-estimate. The Society, for instance, uses all the multi-media tools at its disposal to explain the cultures, societies, traditions, religion, politics and economies of Asia. At first glance, your approach might resemble a kaleidoscope or a mosaic. Look more deeply and you can see the way your work relies on the steady accumulation of new insights and the clever use of disparate perspectives. The Society's products are an example of the getting of wisdom, one from which all of us in the region can learn and profit.

In the same spirit, the Prime Minister has been encouraging a conversation throughout the region about an Asia-Pacific community. For seventy years now, since the beginning of the war in the Pacific in December 1941, Australia has sought to define, to strengthen and to deepen our engagement within Asia and the Asia

Pacific region. It should not be surprising that Australian Governments would put forward initiatives to strengthen Asia Pacific cooperation. That is patently in our interests, and we have a long and honourable habit of doing so

Australia was closely involved in the Colombo Plan of the 1950s to help lift living standards in Asian countries. The Colombo Plan gave a generation of young Asian students the chance to come to know (and often very much to like) Australia. Over 40,000 students benefited from the Plan, over 30 years.

We signed as early as 1957 an agreement on commerce with Japan, a most important step in building a new foundation for our relations with Japan. More recently, we have signed FTAs with Singapore, with Thailand, and – with New Zealand – an ASEAN-wide FTA as well.

The incoming Labor government established diplomatic relations with China in 1972.

Australia became ASEAN's first Dialogue Partner in 1974

We were one of the key players in the establishment of APEC in 1989, and, later, in the critical addition of a leaders' meeting to the APEC agenda

Australia was a founding member of the ASEAN Regional Forum in 1994, having helped to develop that idea, and has been an active participant in the East Asia Summit since it first met in 2005.

Australia played an important role in the Cambodia peace settlement.

Kevin Rudd last week pointed to the establishment of the PricewaterhouseCoopers Melbourne Institute Asialink Index as a vital new tool for assessing how well our aspirations for Asia engagement translate into reality.

The Asialink Index has brought together for the first time a diverse array of data ranging from trade and investment to tourism, migration and humanitarian assistance.

The index shows that Australia's engagement with Asia has grown by a factor of more than four since 1990 – significantly outstripping our engagement with the rest of the world.

In other words, our level of economic and cultural engagement with Asia is now more than four times what it was 20 years ago – reflecting a transformation in Australia's place in the global economy.

In the same period our ties with the countries of South East Asia have also grown by a factor of four.

And our relations with China have grown by a factor of 15.

The Rudd Government has taken this process a step further from engagement with Asia to engagement with Asia with the rest of the world. As Mr Rudd pointed out himself:

This year, we joined the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation summit as an observer.

In October, for the first time, we will participate in the Asia Europe Meeting. We will have a seat at the table when the leaders of the world's most economically dynamic region meet with the leaders of the world's largest single market – the European Union.

We are working closely with regional partners such as South Korea, Japan, China and Indonesia to reform global economic governance through the G20.

Institutions and groupings in the Asian region emerge at their own pace, in their own way, on their own terms. The way they evolve may not bear much resemblance to textbook accounts of institutional behaviour, nor, indeed, to precedents elsewhere, especially with the EC and the EU. Nonetheless, they make gains and have served us well.

ASEAN, for instance, has coped with the aftermath to the end of wars in its member countries, with expansion of its membership, and with a new range of unexpected challenges – terrorism, bird flu and swine flu, a terrible tsunami, cyclone Nargis in Burma, pollution. ASEAN has also insisted on its own centrality in any and all regional groupings.

Nonetheless, 35 years after the end of war in Indo-China, 30 years after the start of China's reform policies, and 20 years since the end of the Cold War, our region is still without a regional institution with the membership and mandate to discuss at leaders' level the range of challenges likely to face regional countries into the next decade.

Regional countries should not assume that peace, harmony and concord were pre-determined. They never used to think like that, and should not start doing so now.

The conversation started by Australia in June 2008 is now proceeding in the region, again, in its own way and at its own pace. The Australian Government welcomed, in particular, the outcomes of the ASEAN summit in Hanoi on 8-9 April. At that meeting, ASEAN leaders encouraged the United States and Russia to deepen their engagement in evolving regional architecture.

In a recent speech, Kevin Rudd said of this development:

We need to shape regional dynamics so that cooperation and dialogue are the norm.

We cannot simply sit by and watch relationships in this dynamic region unfold.

I welcome very much the decision of ASEAN leaders at their summit in Hanoi on 8-9 April this year to encourage the United States and Russia to deepen their engagement in evolving regional architecture.

I note also that President Yudhoyono of Indonesia and Prime Minister Lee of Singapore said after they met recently that inviting the US and Russia to meet with ASEAN and the six other members of the East Asia Summit – China, South Korea, Japan, India, Australia and New Zealand – would be one way to achieve this deeper engagement.

It is clear that a range of partners in Asia agree with Australia that reform of our regional architecture – including, vitally, deeper engagement with the United States – is needed.

This is what we are seeking – engagement in a cooperative institution of all the key players in the region.

We do not under-estimate the challenges ahead for the Asian region. Unresolved security problems will need to be addressed, in Kashmir, in the South China sea, with Taiwan, on the Korean peninsula. The sinking of the corvette, “Cheonan”, is a wake-up call for anyone in need of one. On the economic side, Asia economies, especially China and India, are showing remarkably resilient and sustained growth; China and India are transforming themselves, and with them the region. For all countries in the region, though, there are still structural economic issues to address. We do not give credence to straight-line projections of growth rates, GDP's, trade flows or investment trends.

Maintaining growth remains a serious challenge, in each year and for every government in the region. Asia is well-placed essentially because its economic fundamentals are strong. Nonetheless, not even fundamentals can be taken for granted. The countries of the region have weathered the recent economic crisis relatively well – none better than Australia. There is lots more work to do together, and Australia will be actively and purposefully engaged in that work. The Prime Minister, as this award makes clear, will be leading and guiding that work.